Transcript for Interview with the Honorable Michele Tuck-Ponder

INTRODUCTION

WARREN: Good Morning. My name is Diankha Warren and I am currently a second year law student at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Today is Thursday, March 9, 200. It is 11:45 in the afternoon and I am going to interview Michele Tuck-Ponder. Ms. Tuck-Ponder, shall we get started?

TUCK-PONDER: Certainly.

CHILDHOOD

WARREN: Ms. Tuck-Ponder we are going to start with your childhood.

TUCK-PONDER: Okay.

WARREN: When and where were you born?

TUCK-PONDER: I was born in New York City at Sydenham Hospital which is on 125th Street and St. Nicolas Avenue in Harlem.

WARREN: Where were your parents born?

TUCK-PONDER: My mother was born in Drewryville, Virginia which is southern Virginia and my father was born in a place called South Boston, Virginia which is also in the southern Virginia near North Carolina.

WARREN: What did your parents do? What were their professions?

TUCK-PONDER: My dad worked for the post office and drove a cab in New York. He was what they used to call a hacker and my mom worked for Nabisco. She was a ….she packed cookies and she also sold sewing machines at Sears.

WARREN: Did you have any siblings?

TUCK-PONDER: I had two older siblings, my sister Patricia who is two years older than I am and my other sister Jacqueline who is four years older than I am.

WARREN: Do you think that your place in your family shaped your personality or views in anyway?

TUCK-PONDER: I think so. I think being the youngest is the best place to be (laughter).

WARREN: Where were you raised?

TUCK-PONDER: Partly in New York City, partly in the South Bronx. Then, in Teaneck, New Jersey which is in Northern New Jersey.

WARREN: Were there any particular interests or hobbies that you were particularly fond of when you were a child?

TUCK-PONDER: As a child, I liked to read. I just was a veracious reader. I would read anything. So, my mother liked to read also. So I would read her little novels around. I remember one of the times she was reading *Patton Place* and I asked her what fornication meant, because she told me I could always sound out words, and I sounded out that word and I asked her what if meant and of course she wouldn't tell me. But then she wouldn't let me read her books anymore either.

WARREN: What is your fondest memory of high school?

TUCK-PONDER: I was – I had a great time in high school. I'm one of those nauseating people who goes to the reunion and is really happy about it. I think the moment I enjoyed the most, I was in the Bicentennial class, the class of 1976 and one of the things that I really enjoyed the most was coordinating the celebration with our high school class and in the town and nationally and performing a lot of activities in that regard. I was the president of my class and active in student activities.

WARREN: Did you have any role models or mentors during your childhood or adolescent years?

TUCK-PONDER: Other than my mom and my dad, no.

WARREN: How did your family's socioeconomic status, while you were growing up, shape your view of the world?

TUCK-PONDER: I grew up in Teaneck which is not a – I wouldn't characterize it as a -- necessarily a wealthy town but it's a solid middle class place. My parent had to work very hard, as I stated earlier that they both had to work two jobs which is amazing to me now as a parent, that you work two full-time jobs and you raise children and you handle all those things and that's what they did. So I really very much gained a sense that things do not come easily. That life does not hand you things very easily and they were willing to do things that were actually very dangerous. My father drove a cab in New York City at night and that is always a questionable proposition even during the day, but at night he really did put his life in danger to earn extra income so that we could live in this middle class community. And my mother jeopardized her health to work two jobs and to also do all the things that the other moms did such as be class leader, she was my Girl Scout leader, she did all those kinds of things and was very active in the community as well. So, that example of where I was, it said to me that it doesn't really matter how much

money you make and it doesn't really matter how many material things you have. What matters is how willing are you to work hard to get what you want and to improve the lives of your children when they follow you.

WARREN: Do you think that growing up as a black woman is different today than it was when you were growing up?

TUCK-PONDER: I do, I do, I think it's harder and I'm really disappointed that I have to say that but I think that it is a lot harder. When I was growing up as a black girl people didn't expect things of you, there was no sense in their mind or pre – really stereotypical sort of view of black girls. They really didn't expect anything of you so anything you accomplished or achieved was thought to be a wonderful thing. I think that the girls who grow up today have the disadvantage that they have been characterized by the media as having low moral standards, being teenage mothers, being sexually active at an early age, and all these different stereotypes impact their self esteem. And also, how people treat them so they have something to overcome. I didn't have anything to overcome, necessarily, because people didn't have any expectations of black girls.

COLLEGE

WARREN: When did you decide to go to college?

TUCK-PONDER: That was assumed by my parents (laughter) that was not a decision that I made. That was an assumption that for my sisters and I that we were going to college, it was just a question of where.

WARREN: Why did you decide to go to North western University?

TUCK-PONDER: When I was in the 9th grade or 8th grade, I always enjoyed writing very much and I entered a creative writing contest, I wrote a story and I won the contest and there was, of course, this big hullabaloo because I'd won this creative writing contest. And when the person came from *Scholastic Magazine* to give me my award, the Principal had the whole school in the auditorium and it was a big deal and the man turned to me and said, "you should go to Northwestern University" and I said "okay," and that was it. After that I wasn't willing to consider any other place. And I decided to major in journalism because at the time, believe it or not, back in the seventies Heraldo Rivera was a legitimate journalist and was really doing some exciting stories some innovative stories. And journalism was really changing from the reporters believing what public officials and public people told them to really examining and being a lot more aggressive about finding out things and I thought that was very exciting. So, partnered with my love for writing Northwestern was a good place for me to be.

WARREN: What other activities were you involved in at Northwestern University?

TUCK-PONDER: I was president of my class, I was the president of student council, I was a cheerleader, I was a majorette, I was the town - - the high school representative to

the town council, I was the president of the Methodist Youth Fellowship at my church, I did – you name it, I did it. I was very, very active.

WARREN: What is your most vivid memory of your time in college?

TUCK-PONDER: Let's see, college, college, I had a great time in college. I probably would have had better grades if I hadn't had such a wonderful time (laughter). I think my most vivid memory has to do with a protest. There was a protest, and I'm trying to recall and it's really a shame I can't recall at this moment what it was about, but it had to do with the black students and we were sitting around trying to think of a strategy that would really impact everyone at the university. But we didn't want to get kicked out and we didn't want to suffer really any kind of disciplinary measures. So what we did was we had the people who were pledging sororities and fraternities, and I was a member of the sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha, and we decided to make our pledges steal all of the copies of the *Daily Northwestern* which was the campus newspaper. So that next morning when everyone got up they weren't in the place that they were supposed to be and so for that moment it impacted their lives. They didn't know where the meetings were, they couldn't read the news, I mean it was sort of part of their lives. And that is when we got their attention, and brought to their attention to the fact -- and I think it was an inequitable distribution of student activity funds -- I think that is what the issue was. But I just remember sitting around with that strategy and being very excited that I was part of a group that was actually participating in trying to make some change at the college.

WARREN: Have you maintained a relationship with Northwestern University?

TUCK-PONDER: Not really, not really, I haven't which is a shame. Part of it is just the geography doesn't really work very well because it is in Evanston, Illinois and I've been really back in the East ever since I graduated so I really haven't maintained the kind of relationship with the school that I would like to.

WARREN: What types of careers did you consider in college?

TUCK-PONDER: I always thought I'd be a journalist. I always thought I work for a newspaper and that I would write or write novels or do something that had to do with writing or reporting hard news. Actually, I was more interested in writing features, I liked - - I was in the Magazine Track at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern and so I always thought that's what I would be doing. I did not think about a career in law.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSLVANIA LAW SCHOOL

WARREN: When did you decide to go to Law School?

TUCK-PONDER: I decided to go to law school when Northwestern was winding down and my parents asked me what I was going to do for a living. And I wasn't prepared to make a living and I probably shouldn't admit that but I really wasn't and they said "well, if you intent to stay as part of – on our tax return as a dependent then either your going to go to school or your going to do something." And I had done pretty well academically at Northwestern, so I figured I would just take those test: LSAT and MCAT and all those kinds of things to see where I landed and it was – I did the best on the LSAT so I started applying to law school.

WARREN: What or who influenced your decision then, just that experience, do you think there was any other person who might have influenced your decision to choose law school?

TUCK-PONDER: No, I wish that I could say that I was going to effectuate some sort of societal change by gaining some sort of legal education but unfortunately I was not that profound at the age of 22, I was really just looking for some place to land.

WARREN: And why did you decide to land at Penn?

TUCK-PONDER: I decided to land at Penn because – there were some personal reasons and some academic reasons. Because I always thought that it was important to go to the best law school that I could possibly go to and Penn certainly fell into that category as being one of the nation's finest law schools, and that was very important to me. If I was going to engage in this then I thought that Penn would be a good place to go. The other reason is that my mother was very ill at the time. So I couldn't go very far from away from northern New Jersey so I was really restricted to a place in New York or in New Jersey or Pennsylvania some place where I wouldn't be that far away from being with her.

WARREN: Do you remember what it was like being a 1L at Penn?

TUCK-PONDER: I do. I do.

WARREN: What was it like?

TUCK-PONDER: (Laughter) I remember - - I had no idea. I knew no one who had ever gone to law school, other than someone who I think had been the previous Mayor of my town. I didn't know anybody and I had no idea of what to expect. So I walked into Professor Burbank – Steven Burbank, he used to teach Civil Procedure, and I walked in and I sat down and at the end of the class when I looked at my body, I'd broken out into hives (laughter) all over my arms and my legs. And I turned around to look at the person

next to me and they said what's wrong with your face. I absolutely just - - my whole body just rejected the entire notion of being there. So that is actually one of my most vivid memories of being a 1L, was that first class because Professor Burbank scared me to death.

WARREN: What activities were you involved in?

TUCK-PONDER: Oh, I was in BLSA [Black Law Student's Association], I think I was the vice president one year. We had our student government-- used to be… it never was a student bar association when I was here, it was called-- I can't remember what it was called and that's a shame because I was the president and I participated as the 1L class representative, the 2L class representative and then I was the class president when I was a third year student.

WARREN: How was the general demographic make-up of the student body of the law school in the early eighties?

TUCK-PONDER: In the early eighties the law school was, of course as it probably is today, predominately white. There were, and I used to count, there were twelve African-American's in my class, fifteen African-American's in the class after my class of -- I'm eighty-three —class of eighty-four, I think eighty-two and eighty-one the numbers were even less than my class. But of course, there was some attrition there as well-- that when people came they didn't necessarily stay.

WARREN: Do you remember how many black women there were in your graduating class?

TUCK-PONDER: In my graduating class I can actually count them on my fingers. Probably about five.

WARREN: How do you think your experience as a black woman in the law school was different than that of other students?

TUCK-PONDER: I thought, once I got here and figured out what was going on, and it me a little while to figure out what was going on. And I don't say that in the sense that there was some sort of conspiracy to keep me from being informed it was really a function -- I had absolutely no idea of what to expect. And so once I figured out, you know, how I was going to cope for three years and part of this --and I should say that after I walked out of Professor Burbank's class it never occurred to me to quit because that is not part of my vocabulary. I knew that I was going to have to stay for three years so I had to figure out a way as to how I was going to cope. So unfortunately, I became very well acquainted with Entenmann's cakes and some other (laughter) goodies and I could say I ate my way through law school, but I could also say that I decided to find a place where I was very comfortable and that was student government. And so once I figured out that that was how I was going to cope by trying to improve the quality of life of people here, then it became a lot easier to -- I enjoyed the experience as much as

reasonably could be expected. So my experience here as a black woman, there weren't very many of us, so you really had to become a lot – develop relationships with people of other races and that was really just how you were going to do it. And since in college I had been in a black sorority and really practiced self segregation to a large degree, when I got to law school I had to really shift my social focus and my personal focus and become or develop relationships with people from different races and it was –it was fine. I think I learned – I think I gained some very important life skills in doing that, and in fact, I count as my best friends from law school, people who are not African-American. Or some people, there are some people who are dear to me who are African-American but there are – it's a widely diverse group of folks.

WARREN: Can you recall if there were any black women or other minority faculty members when you were a student?

TUCK-PONDER: Oh, Regina Austin. Absolutely, no she was terrific. She was just terrific and Ralph Smith was -- there were only two. This is not something that would take me a long time to think about – it was Ralph Smith and Regina Austin. And something that I found really inspiring about Professor Austin is, first of all, the level of intellect that she brought to legal analysis, it spoke to me and interestingly enough in all my classes, at least initially, her torts class was the one that I understood. Because her sense of fairness because of being an African-American woman and where she has been and what her experiences were-- were very different from the White male professors here at the school. So when she talked about torts and she talked about recourse and she talked about liability, she said it in a way that I could understand and that was reflected in my grade, that I really understood what it was that she was talking about. And I found a similar experience as well with Professor Smith. So it was very interesting if you look at my transcript, that you will see that when I took classes with them – and of course once you figure that out you take every class they offer because you're trying to pump up your grade point average – but it was – there were some cultural differences in terms of how we understand law and our sense of justice and fairness that they were able to communicate a lot better to me than some of the other professors. I think the other interesting thing was how my classmates treated Professor Austin and Professor Smith and some of the disrespectful behavior of my classmates that they would never dream of doing when they sat in a class with a white professor, they would do in a class with a black professor. And frequently –I shouldn't say frequently -- on more than one occasion, particularly Professor Austin, had to step people back and my response to that was probably not as mature as it should have been. But I would then feel free to sometimes conduct myself in a way that was not totally respectful, in my white professor's classes because I felt so offended and angered by how my white classmates treated black professors. Not mature, but that's what happened.

WARREN: So which professor would you say had the largest influence on you?

TUCK-PONDER: At University of Pennsylvania Law School?

WARREN: Yes.

TUCK-PONDER: Okay. Let me see. Think, think , think, think. There are people who had different influences and I couldn't say that one is the be all end all. There was Professor Burbank who as I told you, scared me to death but, he really pushed me to stretch my intellect. I always made sure – and I was crazy enough to take him twice. I took him once for Civil Procedure which I didn't have any choice to do but I also took him for Conflict of Laws and I worked very, very hard because I really wanted to excel in those classes. There was a Professor Aronstein, and he taught Commercial Law and he also would tell us stories about—he played a piano in a bar to work his way through law school and he sold used cars and so of course in Commercial Law. With the U.C.C., used car sales, the illustrations are just perfect and he had a million stories to tell us. And I always liked his teaching style I thought it was very down to earth and like the way he influenced me in that way. Let me see, I'm trying -- this was a long time ago you're pressing me here. Professor Austin, of course, and I would also say –I'm trying to remember classes I –Judge Higgenbothem, Judge Higgenbothem who recently passed away taught a class called: *In The Matter of Color* and it basically explored slave codes and Jim Crow laws and how the evolution of American Law impacted the growth and well being of African-Americans and so he had us write and do research. So I went to Richmond, Virginia to do research at the state library for that class and that had a big impact on me as well because it never occurred to me to think of and interpret laws as they impacted a particular group.

WARREN: What was your favorite course in law school?

TUCK-PONDER: I don't remember like a whole year and a half of law school so this is a real challenge for me. I'd have to say torts.

WARREN: What did you like the least about law school overall?

TUCK-PONDER: I didn't care for the environment. It was not a nurturing environment. It was very much one that you were left to your own devices. And we had very -- there were support systems, there was BLSA, the black law student's union, and we had a Big Brother, Big Sister Program so there was some nurturing there. You could find some support in other areas of the university community but within the school there was very much a sense of you are privileged to be here and you better work hard in order to stay here. And so I look that the physical plant now and I would point that out as an example, when I was a student here, we had a student lounge that – the chairs in it – it looked like a Greyhound bus station and I was the president of student government we tried to get the lounge improved and it was always – the feeling was, if you were studying the way you ought to be, you wouldn't have time to (laughter) lounge around." And just, just incidents like that and as the president of student government, probably more so than the average student, I really had a very clear sense of what the response was to articulated student needs. So I am probably a lot more sensitive about that and recall that in much greater detail.

WARREN: What is your fondest memory of law school?

TUCK-PONDER: There was an assistant dean here called Margo Marshak and she decided one day that it would be a good exercise to take me to the theater. So, she took me to see Amadeus on Broadway, and that was one of the kindest things that anyone ever did when I was a student here. And there were people who were terrific in the registrar's office, in the Dean's office and in the placement office but that stands out in my mind as one of the best experiences while I was here.

WARREN: This is the year book from 1983, the year you graduated, are there any particular faces that you recognize?

TUCK-PONDER: I remember Professor Austin and Professor Aronstein. Oh, Professor Goodman, I remember him (laughter). Professor Goodman had us over, he taught Constitutional Law, he had us over to his home for a holiday function, at which time, and I really don't recall the issue at all, but he and I got into a pretty energetic discussion over a certain issue as it impacted African-Americans and I do recall my classmate saying that I spoiled the party (laughter). And that's okay. I remember Professor Haskins, I remember Professor Gorman, I think Professor Gorman lives in Princeton now actually. Doug Frenkel, I think I just saw him. Professor Cathcart, ooh Professor Leech. Virginia Kerr lives in Princeton now, I remember her. Seth Kramer, I remember him. Leo Levin, what dear man, he is a really good guy. And Professor Lonsdorf who was a also dear man, I enjoyed his class very much; The Psychology of Law. Professor Reitz, Professor Shulhofer I remember him. Ed Sparer, Spaeth, he's a judge I believe. Professor Spritzer, Criminal Procedure, Professor Smith. Professor Summers, what was that – Labor Law. And I remember Libby Gary, Ernie, of course, Farris Burgeon. Now this is funny because the people who I remember are not going to be the Professors they are going to be the ones, Lenny, in reproduction those are like my buddies. Alice Lonsdorth the assistant Dean for Alumni Affairs. Now she was really good because, of course, I was always trying to make extra money and so I drove the dean around, what was his name at the time, I can't remember his name, but, for alumni events so they'd give me the car and I would drive around and I really did have a time with him and she really offered me a lot of opportunities to make money so that was good.

WARREN: Have you maintained contact with anybody from your graduating class?

TUCK-PONDER: I sure did. I sure did. Kim Lewis who's in my class, and actually -- I see her pretty regularly. We lost contact for a long time and that's kind of how it's been but we got back in contact and we're still friends. Robert Marchman, I see every so often. And I also am very good friends with Karen Spores, Karen Spores did not graduate from Penn Law School, she started here and then she finished at the University of Wisconsin but she was probably my closest friend when I was here and she's in Milkwaukee now and whenever she has cases here we get together. And she was at my wedding and so I see her periodically.

WARREN: What were some of the political issues facing society in the 1980s such as the New Regan Administration affect the Law School Community?

TUCK-PONDER: I think one of the biggest issues that we dealt with was gay and lesbian rights at the law school. And that was huge because at the time the University had a lot of contracts with the Navy, I'm pretty sure it was the Navy. And, the placement office had an anti-discriminatory policy, if you discriminated you could not interview University of Pennsylvania law students. Well, the University, of course the JAG Corps, the Judge Advocate General, wanted to come in but they discriminated against because based on sexual orientation. Well as far as were concerned, discrimination was discrimination. And so, we protested to make sure none of the armed forces, or the JAG Corps could not come in and interview as long as they discriminated against people for their sexual orientation. So I remember going to see the President of the University and sitting outside of his office. So, we made this appointment and he kept canceling it so, with the rest of student government, I went over there and we brought a deck of cards and snacks to eat outside of his office because we knew that he was going to have us sitting out there for two hours and then tell us we couldn't get in. So we sat out there for two hours and ate snacks and dropped crumbs all over the rug and played cards. None of us new how to play cards anyway but we faked it pretty well and we finally got in to see him and he basically told us that the University had to much to lose financially, so they were going to be required to make an exception to allow the Navy to interview at the law school, which we thought was unacceptable. So, I wrote a letter to the Daily Pennsylvanian, not really being aware that when you have a meeting with the President of the University, that everything that happens in the meeting is confidential. No, I really didn't know that so (laughter) I wrote this letter basically reiterating everything that he had said in the meeting so it ended up being this huge brew-haha outside of his office because he said some things that really weren't too flattering about students and they weren't too flattering about gays and lesbians and so that whole issue was really big on campus at the time. I think that when Ronald Reagan was elected we realized just how bad he was. I didn't find out about that until I was just about out of law school. I started law school with Jimmy Carter and also, Frank Rizzo was the Mayor of Philadelphia so he made Ronald Regan look good. So actually, you have to take these things in context because by the time I law school Wilson Goode had been elected Mayor of Philadelphia and even thought that turned out in a way that wasn't that great either, there was a lot of change going on at the time. So depending on the time of year we were involved or we were not involved, I was involved in student council elects and just – I liked politics at the time so I did stay involved. But on a national level other things happened. John Lennon was killed, the Pope was shot, those are things that kind of stand out in my mind that sort of pierced this sense that law school is the be all end all and this is all I'm going right now, but there were things happening in the world that we were paying attention to.

LAW CLERK, D.C. SUPERIOR COURT

WARREN: After law school you clerked, who did you clerk for?

TUCK-PONDER: I clerked for the Honorable Reginald B.Walton, Superior Court of the District of Columbia.

WARREN: What did you gain from this experience?

TUCK-PONDER: A real strong knowledge that I didn't want to (laughter) practice law. I was convinced after that, not because of anything the judge did, but being in the courtroom every day. Well, I knew I didn't want to practice criminal law. Let me be specific. I didn't want to practice criminal law because watching the parade of criminals go through that courtroom and watching the impact of crime on people's lives, I just never felt that as a public defender or a prosecutor that I was ever going to be able to effectuate any kind of change on any kind of significant scale by representing folks at that level. And it just was not something that I wanted to do even though I had a great time.

WARREN: What was it like clerking for a Judge Walton?

TUCK-PONDER: Judge Walton was a very young judge and he had been appointed by Reagan. So we were on opposite ends of the political spectrum anyway. And he was very down to earth, he didn't see himself as, I'm the judge, you're the clerk. He was sort of "hey, Michele what do you thing about that" [response] "you're wrong." I mean so we could have very, very candid discussions about cases and laws and what was going on in the world. And that is something that has endured, I still have a relationship with Judge Walton and he's been very much a good friend and someone who I rely on.

WARREN: Did this experience change your opinion of the judiciary?

TUCK-PONDER: You know what yes, it did. Because I somehow – I thought that they were smarter and that's how they got to be judges and then I found out that that's not why you get to be a judge.

ASSOCIATE, ZUCKERMAN, SPAEDER, GOLDSTEIN, TAYLOR & KOLKER, L.L.P.

WARREN: After your experience clerking you started as an associate in a D.C. Firm, which firm did you work for?

TUCK-PONDER: Zuckerman, Spaeder, Goldstein, Taylor & Kolker?

WARREN: What was this experience like?

TUCK-PONDER: I'll give you an illustration of this experience and this is sort of when black woman really starts to impact my life (laughter). I worked on a matter with a partner, a female partner, for someone whose husband had passed away. The husband was a big client of the firm. The husband had passed away and so I was working on the estate. He owned a bunch of parking garages in D.C. and so I worked with the senior partner on managing some of these assets, on putting them in sort of a place that they would preserve their value and the firm could continue representing this woman. And so I talked to her on the phone more than once a day and when she came into finalize the arrangements that we made in settling the estate she was in with the senior partner who said, "you should meet Michele, she's done all this work for you" and so she calls me in and I come in and the woman sitting there and she turns around and she stares at me and says, "she is colored." And I think I said something really smart like, since 1958 or something like that, and she woman insisted that the work all be done over and she was willing to pay for it. So the managing partner at the firm said to me, when I said you guys should stand up for me you should refuse to do this—there is no substantive reason that she's offered she's only saying this because she wants to –she's dissatisfied with my race as opposed to my performance, and he said she's an important client and I know how you feel but I think that this is something that we have to do and its no reflection on you. So I quit.

PRESS SECRETARY FOR REPRESENTATIVE LEWIS STOKES – D.C

WARREN: When you quit you became press secretary to representative Lewis Stokes in Washington DC between 1986 and 1987. How did this come about.

TUCK-PONDER: Because I quit my job and I didn't have another one (laughter). So, at that point – and I always like politics, so I had a friend from law school, Pat Petty, who I actually also stay in touch with, who knew someone from her college days who was Congressman Lewis Stokes' top administrative aide, which was your top office manager, it's not an office manager it's a lot more important than that. But at any event, that's the person who runs the office. They were looking for a press secretary and my undergraduate degree was in journalism. So, I went over there and met with him and I got the job as a press secretary.

WARREN: Did you stay in contact with Representative Stokes?

TUCK-PONDER: Um huh, I do.

WARREN: Did you always know that you wanted to work on the Hill at some point?

TUCK-PONDER: No. I had absolutely no idea what it was. We call it – it's finally called the world's biggest plantation and I was a field hand (laughter). It's just really – you work - - and this is --I think I gained a really important work ethic you work until it's done or you work until the Congressman says you don't have to work anymore. And so that was, I had never seen anything like that before in my life. But you had no rights, you could be, at the time when I worked there, you could be sexually harassed, fired without cause, they could tell you what to wear, what time to get there what time to leave, you had absolutely no rights whatsoever, it was a plantation. It still is a plantation it's just that they are neater about it these days. But it was not something that I expected, not something that I sought, but something that I gained a lot from.

WARREN: Did you know anything about the reputation of Congressman Stokes prior to working with him?

TUCK-PONDER: I knew about Carl Stokes. Carl Stokes was his brother and he had been the first African –American mayor of a major American city, Cleveland. But Louis Stokes argued *Mapp v. Ohio* before the Supreme Court, that was his case. So, I didn't know that before I got there but I learned it once I got there.

WARREN: What was a typical day as a press secretary like?

TUCK-PONDER: Oh, you get there in the morning, then you try to so – Lewis Stokes was on the house intelligence committee and he was on the house approriations committee and at the time with intelligence that's when Ollie North was flying over with cake's with files in them and doing all that kind stuff. So it was really interesting because Congressman Stokes was involved with the Ollie North matter in the hearings. And this is interesting because the CIA is not supposed to engage in domestic spying, they engaged in domestic spying all the time. We could not talk on the phones in our office, I could not --we could not talk on our telephones at home. If we were going to say anything about the North case or any kind of press release or anything like that, we could not talk on the phone and you couldn't talk in the office either. If you wanted to speak to someone about a confidential matter you had to get up, go out of the office and walk down the hall and talk down the hall. So, so much for people doing what they are supposed to do. But in any event that was my usual day. Usually in the morning, *Nightline* or one of the news programs would call and would want the Congressman to appear on there. Usually to talk about something that he couldn't talk about because it was intelligence and so he would say no I can't talk about that so I'm not going to go on. And then that night at 11:33 my phone would right because Congressman Doohickey from Boondocks, Louisiana, who was on the Appropriations Committee, would be on Nightline talking about stuff that he wasn't supposed to talk about either. So, that was kind of life, writing press releases, floor statements, doing the Congressional Newsletter, that kind of thing. But it was a lot of work

WARREN: Was there any particular person or experience that had a significant influence on your view of politics?

TUCK-PONDER: Oh, Jessie Jackson. Jessie Jackson ran for President the first time I was there it was 1984 and so I was the liaison, staff liaison, to the Black Caucus and I remember the night they had this dinner for Jessie Jackson. This is actually pretty funny. He comes in and I had no idea, and when you see Jessie Jackson from a distance, especially back in that time your thinking: oh this guy, there's nothing to him. I remember the first time I went to a rally and there where people lined up around the block to get into this rally for Jessie Jackson. I was unbelievable. Then he shows up at this Black Caucus closed dinner and he announces to the Caucus that he is going to run for President of the United States. And, wait a minute let me see, let me get my time straight because I graduated from Penn in eighty-three, I clerked in eighty-four, I worked for Stokes in eighty-five, so this is when he was going to run again in eighty-six. I'm getting my years confused but I know Jessie was going to run. And I thought, this is fantastic he's coming in, he's talking to the Black Caucus, he's telling them I'm going to run for President and I expected them to line up behind him and state their commitment right at that moment. This is when I was a political novice because (laughter) they said, "you can't run in my district! Arrrrr arrr !" I mean they just actually – their response was not a positive one, let me put it to you that way. But it was the behavior that was absolutely atrocious and that's when I became very knowledgeable or very aware that in politics there are no permanent friends just permanent interests. And everybody's permanent interest is themselves. And that is – unfortunately, I would like to say something a little bit more positive about it but that was my experience. Not only with the Black Caucus, you name it, Black Caucus; the Northeastern State Caucus; the Cold State Caucus; you name it whatever that Caucus is, people's interests are themselves and their constituents and to hell with everybody else. And so the issue is to find common ground so that you can have a win-win.

WARREN: Would you say that was the most valuable lesson you learned?

TUCK-PONDER: Absolutely.

WARREN: Did you have a change to conduct any press conferences?

TUCK-PONDER: Oh, yeah sure.

WARREN: What was your first experience like?

TUCK-PONDER: Nobody came (laughter). You write all these press releases and you get the little room in the Rayburn Building and you call everybody and they say, oh yeah Michele we're coming and it's ten o'clock and it's you and the Congressman (laughter). There's nobody there, that is that's when you learn, you know, about serving food about – God forbid you do anything in the morning, third, you really have to be sure that you're not conflicting with anything else. If they always – if Congressman - some other

Congressman or Senator because let's say if you have the Akron Beacon Press cover you on the hill. Well if Senator Glenn or Senator Metzenbaum, who was there, I'm dating myself but they were there, if there doing something, there is only one person from the Akron Beacon Journal and unless Louis Stokes is announcing a gizillion dollars coming to Cleveland, then they are more than likely going to be over on the Senate side. So it's those kind of things you learn by the seat of your pants. Because then the Congressman looks at you and says, well home come nobody's here? (laughter). Damned if I know.

SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO SENATOR FRANK LAUTENBERG, U.S. SENATE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

WARREN: After this experience as press secretary, you where a special assistant for two years to Senator Frank Lautenberg, U.S. Senate, Washington.

TUCK-PONDER: Um, huh.

WARREN: How did this come about?

TUCK-PONDER: Like most jobs on the Hill, you would like to think that there is a place you go and apply –that's not how it works-- I got that job because somebody I knew her kid went to daycare with Senator Lautenberg's office manager and they were talking and she said oh, we have an opening in our office and so I went over there and applied. My chief qualification is that I was from New Jersey because nobody in the office was from New Jersey and that I was African-American and nobody in the office was African-American. So, and I don't think that's why I got the job, but those were probably –that's probably what pushed me over the top in an election year.

WARREN: Both Senator Lautenberg and Representative Stokes have classified themselves as being raised in poverty. Did this aspect of their lives in any way influence your decision to work for them?

TUCK-PONDER: Not Stokes, but Lautenberg, yes. Because Lautenberg wore that – that was really a badge of honor for him. He also believed in going back. So he would go back, he adopted a school in Patterson, and he would go back and promised a second grade class that if they finished high school that he would send them to college and pay for all of their college expenses so and he followed through on that I think he ended up sending eight kids to college. But think about it when you have a class of twenty-five kids, eight kids end up going to college it's a sad commentary. But he loved Patterson, he always –he was very, very compassionate. I think that it was a function – because his father didn't keep jobs and he moved around a lot so Senator Lautenberg was very compassionate to children who didn't have what they needed. I found Congressman Stokes to be, he had been around a lot longer and he was more of a national figure, believe it or not, because of his seniority. And so he tended to be more involved in broader issues or issues regarding national policy than Senator Lautenberg did, Senator Lautenberg was New Jersey first and that's how he ran it and Congressman Stokes was really one that had to deal with things in a broader sense. Also taking into account that

when you're an African American member of the Congress or Senate, there are a lot of African Americans who have no representation so you are not just representing the people from 21st District of Ohio, you're representing people from all over the United States. From California, from Texas who are calling you and telling you that they need some help and that their member of Congress, their representative is not representing them and so you really have a much broader constituency as an African-American member of Congress. It's a tough job.

WARREN: What were your responsibilities as Special Assistant to Senator Lautenberg?

TUCK-PONDER: I…I dealt with the public. Mostly on environmental issues but really anytime anybody had an issue with the federal government whether it was dredging, because of beach erosion or whether people had, what is that gas –Radon. Radon in their basement or, if, God forbid, they find out that their house was built on the former site of a dynamite factory and there was arsenic and all kinds of really nice things in the ground making their children sick. Anything that had to do with people who where really unhappy and a large group, that is who I dealt with and I tried to come up with legislative initiatives, regulatory initiates, those kind of things to respond to the needs of people in New Jersey.

WARREN: What was your fondest memory of your experience as Special Assistant?

TUCK-PONDER: There was – New Jersey has one of the highest rates of AIDS in the country among – Pediatric aids, AIDS against heterosexual females for a whole variety of reasons. Because we have a large population that uses intervenes drugs and just for a whole variety of reasons. And so at that time, one of the doctors in New Jersey called me up because he said he wanted to do something on lead poisoning and there was federal funding for lead poisoning. So I went to the hospital and he took me to a ward and there were a bunch of kids running around. It looked like a daycare center. And he said, this is the AIDS ward. This is – all of these babies have AIDS. And you know it's funny, because it still almost haunts me, it makes me want to cry. But um—they all had AIDS and their mothers had abandoned them. So there was nobody – there were –they call them border babies but they were living in the hospital and the nurses were basically taking care of these babies. Well, what was happening in New Jersey is that doctors were running into infants and children with AIDS and they didn't know how to treat them so they wanted to start a Pediatric AIDS Resource Center. Where a doctor could call up and say, I've got this baby, these are the symptoms, what's the treatment protocol. And they would have the latest on treatment protocols. So at the time Ronald Reagan was President and Ronald Reagan was not thinking about AIDS, especially little black babies in Newark with AIDS. So, but Louis Sullivan was the Secretary of Health and Human Services and Louis Sullivan did care about babies with AIDS. So, I talked to the Senator about it and told him how you could hold a baby in your hand and how it lived in the hospital and the whole nine --- and I cried and, you know, I did the whole thing he said, you get Louis Sullivan to come to New Jersey and get the money get him to give some money and if he sees it, you know, I'll carry the ball but you've got to do all this. So, I did. I didn't tell the truth all the time and I did some things – and actually I can't say I'm

– - I think I'm proud of everything I did because Louis Sullivan showed up in New Jersey. What I had to end up doing is he was coming to New Jersey for 100 black men event. So what I did was I send another car to the airport to pick him up instead of 100 black men (laughter) and took him to the hospital for this event, which, he didn't really - - he new about it but they were going to not go to this event because the administration didn't really want him to go to this event. So I know the Hundred Black Men had to pick him up at the airport within a certain time so I just sent another car and had them say they were 100 Black Men and took them to the hospital instead. We gave them to 100 Black Men we only had him for a half-hour we took him to 100 Black Men after that. And he saw it, and he saw the babies and he saw what they were doing and we got the money and now we have a Pediatric AIDS Resource Center.

WARREN: Have you ever considered running for Congress?

TUCK-PONDER: (Laughter) I have too many skeletons (laughter). No, I actually have considered running for Congress. I don't think I -- I don't live in the right place, I probably would do – I probably could win an election in some other location but where I'm living now we have a great member of Congress and I wouldn't want to change.

TUCK-PONDER: Can we take a break here for a second.

---Break ----

SENATOR LAUTENBERG'S NEW JERSY OFFICE

WARREN: After working with Senator Lautenberg, you left Washington, D.C. and moved to New Jersey. What influenced you to make this decision?

TUCK-PONDER: Actually, what happened was, is that Senator Lautenberg transferred me. Of course, he has two offices in New Jersey and after the 1988 election – what happens in Washington is that when legislative initiatives plan what should we do for the state first of all people would be really surprised to find out when they go into their Congressional offices that most of the people are not from the state. Those people are hired in those offices for their expertise not for where they were born. So, you had people who were very bright, very talented and very skilled who didn't know – as I used to say – who thought Teaneck was a sweater. And so, they didn't know anything about New Jersey so they would come up with legislative initiatives that were awful, and so part of what I did because I was from the State is that I knew people and I would talk to them and find out about issues. For example, we had a spate of teen suicides up in Burton County, what happens in that – this whole practices of teen suicides is that kids get into this copy cat mode. And you know how kids are just so, so dramatic, if you -- you can probably remember when you were sixteen, I can't (laughter) but I seem to remember that the worst thing in the world, I think I'm going to take my life. And so, when they see someone else do it, it looks romantic, it's like oh, this is so sad and – you

know all that stuff. We started having five or ten kids committing suicide in the same place. Well, we wanted the National Institute of Health to study the problem and see if we could institute some preventive measures. But if you were in Washington and you're reading the Star Ledger or you're reading the Asbury Park Press you're not going to know about what a big issue this is in this community or I this region, or amongst educators or health professionals. But when you see them all the time, they come up to you and they say, this is important so then you can call Washington and say, legislative initiatives, this is what you ought to do. So Senator Lautenberg decided that it would be helpful to have somebody in New Jersey familiar with the process, the appropriations process, the regulatory process, all those things that happen on the Hill, to be in New Jersey to find out what was going on and then let the people from Washington know. So not only could we really focus and direct our legislative efforts but also bring money back to New Jersey so we could help people and so I went to New Jersey to work in his New Jersey state office.

ASSITANT DIRECTOR OF THE NEW JERSEY DIVISION IN CIVIL RIGHTS

WARREN: In 1991, you were the Assistant Director of the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights.

TUCK-PONDER: Um, uh.

WARREN: How did you move from working for Senator Lautenberg to this position?

TUCK-PONDER: Sentator Lautenburg's state Director when to the Florio administration to be the Deputy Chief of Staff and so when they were staffing the Division on Civil Rights, they were looking for someone to deal with the public and that was my strong suit and so that's – they invited me to come and they offered to pay me a lot more money than I was making working for Senator Launtenburg and so I went and I was the assistant director of citizen's right's programs and the bureau of education which is basically riot duty. Anytime there was a riot -- Al Sharpton and I to this day are friends because I got to see him all the time because he was constantly leading protests and marches and things in New Jersey.

WARREN: What did you like best about this position.

TUCK-PONDER: I really liked the fact that people had somewhere to go when they had been wronged. Civil Rights is near and dear to my heart as it probably is for most people of color, but when I was at the Division of Civil Rights, we really responded to people. We really tried to help them and we really tried to persuade legislators and other folks who were decision-makers to do things in a fair, more just and equitable fashion. And when people had been really wronged, when I was working for the Division of Civil Rights children were being killed, so what else is new. Things really haven't changed that much. There was a teenager in Teaneck who had been shot in the back by a police officer and there were two kids riding in a stolen van and the police when the stopped the van, they stopped it with bullets and they fired in forty sum odd bullets into the van and

they killed a young fifteen year old girl and, you know, you have to kind of talk to people and say, there's something wrong with that. Another thing I worked on, I trained all the New Jersey state police on discriminatory road stops. I guess I was effective right, that was back in ninety-one, they're still doing it. So, you know, you have to kind of work on these things and that's what I do.

WARREN: Why did you leave this position?

TUCK-PONDER: Because I got offered the wonderful position of being the Assistant Counsel to the Governor in the Governor's office.

ASSITANT COUNSEL TO GOVERNOR JIM FLORIO

WARREN: How did this transition come to be, did someone come and talk to you, or?

TUCK-PONDER: They called you up and say, your new office is room 401, that – and that's the other myth, when your working sometimes in government, especially if your identified as a political person, which I am, you can have the experience of being moved around a lot. And that was my experience. They were having problems with Revered Sharpton and it was partly behind the school funding issue which is again, thirty years New Jersey has been fighting about how we are going to educate our kids. But, they were really having problems with protests and they were having problems communicating with the African-American community and so they said, hey, you have a law degree too don't you? Come on over and be an Assistant Counsel and that's what I did?

WARREN: What were some of your major responsibilities as Assistant Counsel to Governor Jim Florio?

TUCK-PONDER: Advising him on legislation and helping him deal with the black folks, you know, most elected officials need help and I'm not excluding black elected officials either. They need help with folks from the community. And, they need somebody who has contacts and by working Civil Rights, I knew all the ministers, I knew all the NAACP folks, I knew all the Urban League folks. I knew everybody. So it was just easier when we were talking about school funding and we were protesting that I could access that community I could talk to them, find out where their heads were at, see if I could be helpful in guiding the Governor on some of his policies.

WARREN: During 1989-1993 the Governor received a lot of bad press during the so-called New Jersey "Tax Revolt." Did this affect your position as Assistant Counsel?

TUCK-PONDER: Well you know what, he lost the election so that effected my position because I didn't have a job after (laughter) he lost the election. And, it did, people were just really apoplectic about this tax increase. And the unfortunate thing is that I think that if they had been approached in the right way, if you talk to people and explain to people – and I've raised taxes as an elected official believe me, because people have certain

expectations about services and the truth of the matter is that politicians will say, they don't want to pay, they don't mind paying but you have to tell them what they are paying for and you have to let them feel like they are participating. And there was a certain amount of arrogance in the Florio administration. We know best, we are going to shove this down your throat and you're going to like it. Well no they didn't like it, they weren't happy about it and they yelled and screamed and stopped their feet and they voted him out of office.

WARREN: Were you aware of the changes that were going on before you accepted the position?

TUCK-PONDER: Yeah, I was.

WARREN: What made you decide to take the position anyway?

TUCK-PONDER: Well, I thought that folks would get over it (laughter). I was wrong. They didn't get over it.

WARREN: What was the most difficult aspect of being Assistant Counsel to Governor Florio?

TUCK-PONDER: Getting him to listen. It was very hard. Not because he didn't have confidence in us, but he had a lot of people yelling at him. He had his political folks, he had his people from the different departments, he had to listen to the public and we were supposed to take all these different positions or interest groups and try to pull it all together and advise him accordingly. But, you know, as politicians all want to do that, there are some people who have access so it was very difficult trying to persuade him to do things the way we thought would be best.

WARREN: What is the most valuable lesson you learned?

TUCK-PONDER: Do not be afraid to stand on top of a table and yell bloody murder. And that – I actually think I got my best political lesson from that because I was really raised as a very nice girl. I didn't use bad language in mixed company. I was always very polite, I did not ever think that walking into someone's office and threatening to grab them around the throat and do them bodily harm was really and effective tactic. But I think that I have learned in politics that there's a place for all different kinds of tactics. There's the velvet glove, there's the big stick, there's the let's work together we are the world, there's the I'll put you under the ground, I mean and they all have their place, depending on the circumstances. But the one I never did was get on top of the table and scream bloody murder if I thought I was being wronged. And I had an experience in the Governor's office where the time came where I had to really just stand on the table and say, you know, I will have Al Sharpton and everybody I ever met on the street that you never want to see, in here tomorrow if things don't change. And it worked.

WARREN: Do you want elaborate on that experience?

TUCK-PONDER: No, you know, basically what happened was that we lost the legislature, the Democrats lost the legislature in 1992—91, and the blame was placed on the African-American community because we didn't come out and vote. No, a whole lot of people didn't come out and vote. But the blame was placed on us by the power that be within the Democratic Party. And so consequently, the plum jobs like the assistant counsel jobs and the other jobs where there were African-Americans and Latinos and other people of color sitting it was thought well why do we have those people in those spots if they are not going to help us win elections. And so, we were unceremonially--my tongue is twisted – without ceremony we were told that we were no longer – you know—that we were going to be placed somewhere else. And, it wasn't – it wasn't right. So as I watched my colleagues leave very quietly and be treated as if they had not been loyal and hard working soldiers, not Democrats, but people trying to practice good government, it just made me very angry that they were going to try to do that to me too. And so when they came for me – you know it's sort of like that old story that they tell, you know, when they come for other people and you kind of sit there and then when they come for you there is nobody there. Well, when they came for me there was nobody else there but me and I just decided that I wasn't going to let it happen. And I was going to call everybody I knew and I was going to scream load and long and I wasn't going to let that happen to me. And I did. And I acted really very – my mother would not be proud of me at all, she'd not be happy about the language I used, but it worked and people realized that I had accumulated some political capital. Other all the years of working with all the people in the streets when their kids got arrested or when their schools were closing down and all those things that were happening to people. When I helped them and asked for nothing in return I accumulated significant political capital. If you mess with me, I can turn around and call a whole bunch of people in and that's not going to be good for you. So, once I figured that out, it was just really great. And, that's when I started using it.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE NEW JERSEY DIVISION ON WOMEN

WARREN: In 1993, you became Deputy Director of the New Jersey Division on Women. How did move to that position?

TUCK-PONDER: Well, after I discovered that I was not going to be escorted out of the Governor's office without a fight, I had to decide where it was I was going I was going – I needed to land. And I actually went to the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage and Finance Agency for a little while and then I went to the Division on Women because I've always been interested -again, I worked on sexual harassment issues, I'd worked on all those kinds of things and that was a good place for me to be.

WARREN: What services did the Division on Women provide?

TUCK-PONDER: Our big issue was violence against women. And what we were trying to do is broaden the scope of that discussion because usually when they talked about that it was in the context of domestic violence you know drunk husband comes home and he slaps his wife. Well the truth of the matter is violence against women comes in a lot of

shapes, forms and fashions. There is a lot of violence against teenagers, there is a lot of violence against elderly people – that children were battering them. I mean, when you start – if you really look at the kind of violence women endure, there needs to be a – not only a holistic but a very broad approach to how we deal with that and that was one of the issues that we wanted to work on. We wanted to be innovative about it, we wanted to broaden the scope, and we also wanted to draw a picture of a batterer that was not the, you know, the drunken guy who comes home and slaps his wife around. It was also the guy who wears the suit, it was also the teenage high school football player, it was also the daughter who was very frustrated about having to take care of her parents. There's a lot of people, there's a lot of different faces and so we tried to approach it in that way.

WARREN: What aspects of this position most interested you?

TUCK-PONDER: That. The violence against women and approaching issues in a different way and just issues on sexual harassment and how we dealt with it as a state and amongst our employees and getting the private sector to recognize those kinds of things. This was post Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill too, so folks were not thinking about it in the way that it really was. But, those kinds of things were very exciting and the women's community was very lively and it was just – it was a good place to be.

WARREN: Did you meet anyone or have any experience that influenced your political future while serving as deputy director?

TUCK-PONDER: When I was deputy director that's the first time I ran for public office. Because after my experience in the Florio administration I decided that, one, there was nobody there that was any smarter or any more skilled than I was, and two, if I wanted to change things I was not going to do it as a staff person, I needed to be an elected official. So, I was living in Princeton at the time and fortunately Princeton is a great place for an elected official because people listen to you when your form Princeton. So, while I was there I got great support from people who thought women ought to run for office.

MAYOR: TOWNSHIP OF PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

WARREN: When you were elected to Mayor for the Township of Princeton in 1995, where were you at when you learned that you'd been elected?

TUCK-PONDER: I actually was elected to – the way our town is structured, we have a township counsel, which is called a Township Committee. And I was elected to the Township Committee in 1993. And, then once you are on the Committee your colleagues elect you as Mayor and you serve as Mayor for one-year periods. And the first time, I'd been on the Township Committee for a year and one of the people on the Township Committee said to me, you know, I really thing you out to be Mayor. And I said, oh okay that's really nice. And then someone else came to me another day and said, you know, I'd be willing to support you if you want to be the Mayor. I said oh that's really good and then I thought about it and I thought okay you only need three votes: me, you, her… sounds like three to me! So I became the Mayor that way and then I just – I just kept

being the Mayor as long as I wanted. Every year I'd say, I think I'm going a good job, what do you guys think? And they'd say yeah, and then they'd vote for me.

WARREN: Was this, for you, the natural next step in your career?

TUCK-PONDER: It was, It was. I actually served as a full-time Mayor. I did not – once Governor Florio lost in 1994… 1993 --he lost in 1993, so I lost my job in 1994. I became the Mayor in 1995 so I went back to work for Senator Lautenberg for a few months when he ran in 94 and then after that I decided that I couldn't mayor and work a full-time job because it really was a full-time job because it really was a full-time job and so I was a full-time Mayor.

WARREN: What was your primary goal when you first came in as Mayor?

TUCK-PONDER: To – you know I really didn't know. I really didn't think it was going to be as much as it was. I thought, well, you know, you kiss a few babies, you cut a few ribbons, you know show up where you are supposed to be, run the meetings, set up the agenda, and then I-- there was a situation that, I can't be candid about, that happened that sort of rendered my chief administrator unable to perform his duties and so I ended up running the town. And, once I ran the town and I started realizing how much we were being sued. How much we were being sued, how much we were paying for things, we didn't have a personnel manual, we were always, because we were the deep pockets, if anything happened within a fifty mile radius of Princeton, we were one of the defendants. There was just no two ways about it. But just administratively we really needed to clean house and take care of some processes. So, that's what I ended up doing. But my biggest issue had to do with regionalization of services. We have Princeton Township of Princeton Burro and the two towns are really connected they're like donut and a whole. And I thought that we should consolidate into one town because Princeton Borough doesn't have any money and they were always looking to us to pay for everything. So we were going to have to pay for everything, my feeling was well we should just be one town.

WARREN: By the time you were running for your third term had your feelings changed at all?

TUCK-PONDER: No, we had gone through the consolidation process, the measure failed, I knew that Princeton Township was going to go forward by itself and one of the first things we needed to deal with was we needed a new municipal building. So, I put together a committee, we got a design and right now that building is sixty percent done.

WARREN: What would you say the best part about being mayor was?

TUCK-PONDER: Effectuating change. It really – first of all, just helping people. The great thing – the difference between being a local elected official and working on Capital

Hill is, it takes years for anything to happen at those levels. In a town, you say on Monday night something needs to happen, you pass and ordinance or you pass resolution, Tuesday, it's done. That was – that was really one of the great things about it but the other great thing was because I was the Mayor of Princeton, I got to be places and got to sit at tables, and I got to say things and people listened to me because I was from Princeton. If I had been the mayor of South Brunswick or some other small town, I would have been one of 565 other Mayors in New Jersey. But because I was Mayor of Princeton, I – my stature was much higher and my visibility and my profile was much higher. And it really helped because I got to talk about a lot of things that people normally didn't want to talk about.

WARREN: Were you confronted with any particularly challenging issues when you were Mayor?

TUCK-PONDER: Yes, and they were mostly internal. Having to do with – any time you run an operation there are employees with problems, family problems, substance abuse problems, those kinds of things. I had people in my town who were very poor, and it is very hard to be poor in a place where people where wealthy. I had to deal with some issues with our school board and how they dealt with children of color. I had to deal with some discrimination by African-American's against Latinos. I had to deal with some illegal immigration issues where Princeton, because of the nature of the town, people higher a lot of people who aren't in the United States legally, not just Latinos, Irish, Russian, (cough) excuse me, and that's tough. It's tough. And I – they were challenging issues. I had to deal with people who didn't want anybody new to move in Princeton. Anything new built, just all kinds of things so it-- no I really enjoyed it a lot.

WARREN: What is your most memorable experience as mayor?

TUCK-PONDER: I think my most memorable experience as mayor was – there where a lot of them I had a great time. We had some people who were really angry about building a … building …soccer fields … recreational facilities. And so, we had a meeting and, you know, I thought, you know, forty people would show up. Like four hundred people where there. So, we had to move the meeting over to the school cafeteria across the street and you know all these people were really angry at me and it was just – and I remember just thinking in my own mind, you can handle this, you can let all these people say what they want to say. You are going to put some guidelines down and you are going to respect people's different opinions and I remember the other people on the counsel were like, we're not going to listen to all these people. And I said, we are going to listen to every doggoned one of them and I don't care if we are here until three o'clock in the morning. So we had listened people signed up pro and con and I asked people not to repeat what other people said and we were out of there by ten o'clock. And at the end of the day, people may not have agreed with what we did but they couldn't say they hadn't been heard and that is really important.

WARREN: By 1997 there were four African-American women serving as mayors of New Jersey municipalities. Do you remember how many African-American women were serving when you were elected in 1995?

TUCK-PONDER: When I was elected, there were three women elected at the same time and I was, believe me, we all knew each other. Deborah Johnson in South Brunswick, Kimberly Francois in Franklin Township and Sara Bost in Irvington and then there was me, that was four. Let's see, Kimberly stepped down, after I think one year, Deborah just got elected they changed their form of government so she was elected separately because we were all under township committees. And Sara has been the Mayor of Irvington before I became a mayor and she's still the mayor now and I don't think there are any more.

WARREN: How do you think your race and gender played a role in your being mayor and carrying out your duties?

TUCK-PONDER: You know it's really funny. Actually people expect me to say that I got discriminated against. I think the people of Princeton loved the fact that people would say, who's your – where's your mayor and they'd say, there she goes, right there, you can't miss her, that's her right there. Because I think it – to them it made them feel like… people think we're snobby, people think we're not diverse, and we are, we have a black female mayor and we've had her for several years and I think that they – it was something that they were very proud of and very pleased about. And I also think that, and I have to say this, that going to Penn really didn't hurt one…bit. Because part of what's important too is having the kind of credentials and the kind of background that people can relate to and Princeton being a college town it – it actually almost kind of gives you an automatic okay that, well okay we know you went to Penn. We figure if you can get a degree from Penn then, you know, you've got to have a little bit of common sense and some intellect and so that was very helpful.

WARREN: What are the advantages of being a black women mayor?

TUCK-PONDER: It's easy to pick you out in a room full of mayors (laughter). You tend to have the same issues as people – black members of Congress and that is that people who don't live in your town who need help tend to call you. So I, when I was mayor, I made speeches all over the place I mean I and not just in New Jersey, Buffalo, New York, Philly, I mean I just got calls – and sometimes it was just too far away to go. Brooklyn, people would just – they wanted to see a black female mayor because there's just not that many of us around. I'd get invitations to go to Chicago, Texas, people would fly me places it was really amazing. A lot of fun though.

WARREN: Why did you decide to resign in 1997?

TUCK-PONDER: Because I got married in 1996 and I decided I wanted to have a family. I always knew I wanted to have a family. I was getting a little long in the tooth and I figured that if I was going to do it, I needed to do it then and I didn't have any sense

of how I was going to – motherhood was going to affect – pregnancy first of all, and, secondly, motherhood, and I couldn't take care of fourteen thousand people and my family and work. So, something had to go.

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

WARREN: You decided in 1998, to become a Community Building Fellow for the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

TUCK-PONDER: Right.

WARREN: How were you selected for this?

TUCK-PONDER: You send in an application and you were selected for this two-year fellowship program, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development decided that he wanted like an urban Peace Corps. And so he wanted to hire these people for two-year periods to go out and try to go out and do some good in our most distressed areas, which Camden, New Jersey is one and that is were I work.

WARREN: Are there any particular projects that you're working on?

TUCK-PONDER: I'm working on a ton of projects. One, the biggest one's are Brownfield, for mediation. Brownfield's being sites that are contaminated with chemicals and other poisons and trying to make them into usable ground for economic develop or for other purposes. So you just don't have empty lots or broken down buildings so I'm working on that. And the other issue I work with is fair housing because believe it or not, people believe that housing discrimination doesn't happen, it happens all the time, everyday for a whole variety of reasons. So I'm working on a fair housing summit that is going to happen in Trenton in April of this year.

WARREN: What do you hope to achieve as a Community Building Fellow?

TUCK-PONDER: I want to help people to see that you can make change and change will only happen because of you. It's not who you elect, it's not the people you see on TV and it's not the people you read about in the newspaper. It is about you, on your block, in your neighborhood, in your city. That is the only way that change is going to happen. Whether it's because you vote or it's because you pick up a piece of paper off the street, or whether it's because you go to a meeting, or whether it's because you care about the kids who live in your community, you care about the people who live next door, you look out for the older person, you shovel their walk, you have to do things, it's your responsibility nobody is going to do anything for you. And if I could leave people with that realization and with some energy, and some resources, and some structure to get those kinds of things done, then I will feel like I've been successful.

WARREN: What is most frustrating about this position?

TUCK-PONDER: You are ethically prohibited from doing a variety of things that are critical to helping people accomplish those kinds of things. So, I can't go downtown Camden or go into a Camden Community meeting and say, hey, when was the last time you saw your Congressman or, hey, you know what, the freeholder board is getting ready to vote on a bill that is going to take money from your community or, hey, you know that house that burnt down three years ago, you need to go and sit in the Mayor's office and don't leave until it gets demolished or something else happens because it's unsafe for your kids. I can't say those types of things because that's called lobbying. So, I have to come up with really creative ways to try and say the same thing. It makes my job harder, it's not impossible, but it makes it harder.

WARREN: What is most rewarding?

TUCK-PONDER: Most rewarding is the realization that people come to, that they can make change and they can make their lives better and that they have power.

COUNSEL TO THE NEW BRUNSWICK LAW OFFICE OF RHINOLD LAMAR PONDER

WARREN: While you were Mayor you became counsel to the New Brunswisck law office of Rhinold Lamar Ponder.

TUCK-PONDER: Um, huh.

WARREN: Who is Mr. Ponder?

TUCK-PONDER: My husband (laughter).

WARREN: Why did you decide to become counsel in a law office?

TUCK-PONDER: Because I needed a job (laughter).

WARREN: How long did you serve as counsel?

TUCK-PONDER: He fired me! I worked with him for about six months (laughter) and then fired me. He fired me because I didn't work. I didn't work at what I was hired to work at. I worked at being the mayor and so he said, I'm not paying you to be the mayor (laughter), I'm paying you to --- so, I got fired.

PONDER LITERARY PROPERTIES, INC.

WARREN: I also read that you were President of Ponder Literary Properties, Inc.?

TUCK-PONDER: I was, I was no – well actually I still am. We were literary agents so we tried to get people published and we got ourselves published but we didn't manage to get anybody else a book contract but we worked at that for a while.

WARREN: What was the mission of Ponder Literary Properties?

TUCK-PONDER: To get people published.

WARREN: I believe this is the book (Wisdom of the Word: Love) that –

TUCK-PONDER: That is the book. Oh, my goodness! It's in the library are you kidding. I must have given it to them (laughter).

WARREN: What is the book about?

TUCK-PONDER: This is a collection of great sermons by African-Americans. And these are sermons on love, and we decided to collect them for a variety of reasons. One--we are not theologians or preachers or anything, one was historical there was no one place that sermons by African-Americans were collected and that is a tragedy because the back bone of the black community is in the church and the leadership of the black community is in the church and so many of the lessons of life and the guidance and the hope and the spirit of the black community is in the church and we needed to have these words written down somewhere. And so that was the primary reason we decided to do it. And, Random House thought it was a good idea and so they published the book. And, it was my job to collect the sermons and edit them and try to put this book together as something that was balanced. Also to deal with the legal stuff the licenses, the permissions, and copyrights and all those kinds of things.

WARREN: Have you authored any other books?

TUCK-PONDER: Wisdom of the Word: Faith. There's another volume in this set. This is the second volume, the first volume were sermons on faith.

WARREN: Are there any other books in the works?

TUCK-PONDER: We wanted to do a volume on justice but we need to find – we don't have publisher. But when we find one we will.

VIEWS AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

WARREN: Your political involvement has focused on primarily women's issues and on problem solving in the African-American community. For example, you founded the New Jersey African American Organ Donor Awareness Organization in 1990 and you are involved with the Center for the American Woman and Politics. What do you consider to be the most significant work you have been involved with?

TUCK-PONDER: I would say leadership building. That –that really, if you really want to hone in on what's most important to me it is building leadership skills amongst people. And especially women and especially people of color but people because people have to realize that their destiny is in their own hands and they have to be given examples and they have to be given tools and resources to be able to realize that and to participate in this country. I'll give you an example, every time you turn on the news they talk about how great we're doing financially, this country, economically we're in a boom. I don't see – I work in Camden. I don't see those people. Whoever's booming, they don't live in Camden, New Jersey because the people that I see are desperately poor they don't have enough to eat, they don't have a decent place to live there situation hasn't gotten any better. So why is it that everybody else is booming and making so much money that they can't even count it and these people still remain desperately poor. Who's speaking to that, who's talking about that, who's doing something about that. And the truth of the matter is, you can't elect it, because people, individuals, have their own shortcomings and they can't always carry the torch for you. There's got to be some non-elected means by which to effectuate change. And that happens at the grass roots and that happens at the communities. And so, that's why I think that if you have people who are willing to work to pull people together to exhibit some leadership skills, who know how to talk to people, who know what to say, who know who to talk to, all those kinds of things, then you can have people pull themselves up out of what are very desperate situations.

WARREN: In a newspaper article you stated, "I really wish someone had pulled me aside years ago and told me the real story about women and politics . . . [t]he truth is, it really stinks sometimes." What is it about women and politics that stinks?

TUCK-PONDER: (laughter) You know what stinks, is that the powers that be within the partisan structure of politics. And I don't care, you can talk about Ross Perot's Party, and the Democrats and the Republicans they equally stink, is that they think – they don't really believe in their heart of hearts that women ought to be there. Now they'll put up with Libby Dole for a little while, they'll put up with Geraldine Ferraro for a while but when it comes to the really important stuff, they don't think that women should participate or be around. And the truth of the matter is that women are the majority, we have the money, we control the purchases in our households, we are a huge power base just there for the asking. And so, -- but within the political parties partisan wise or even within our legislative houses, we find it a constant battle to be taken seriously and to have our words heard so you are always fighting about but you just have to continue fighting. And again, I go back to the standing no the table and cussing everybody out school of thought which I think can be pretty effective sometimes.

WARREN: So do you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist in terms of the current and future status of women in politics?

TUCK-PONDER: Oh, I'm an optimist, I wouldn't be – I wouldn't be in it if I were a pessimist I'd just go make money.

WARREN: Is this the same for black women in politics?

TUCK-PONDER: I – absolutely, absolutely.

WARREN: Who do think had been the most influential black woman in American politics?

TUCK-PONDER: Barbara Jordan.

WARREN: And why?

TUCK-PONDER: Barbara Jordan was sooo…. smart, first of all. Barbara Jordan came from Dust Bowl, Texas. And these are her words: she was not a beauty queen, as her father told her, you better be smart because you're not much to look at and she didn't let that detour her, she did not bow to anyone she was eloquent, she was brilliant, she was a leader and she did those kinds of things before women were really doing them in any great way. If you go back and look at the impeachment hearings, for President Nixon and the role that she played, and the role she was playing in the Democratic Party at the time. She was such a trailblazer and absolutely, I remember being in high school in 1974 and sitting there watching her and looking at my mom and saying now I want to do that. And so, she has always been very much an inspiration to me and a role model to me.

WARREN: Do you believe that the work of a black woman in politics should be different from any other politicians?

TUCK-PONDER: It has to be. It has be because you know, we've just got a lot more to do. Our constituency is hurting so badly and we have so much to do and so far to go in order to check-- to catch up we've got to work double time. And my mother used to also tell me that you have to work twice as hard to get half as far and while that's not the most optimistic advice that one can give you (laughter). She was absolutely right.

WARREN: Do you believe that African Americans should rely on law or politics to solve problems?

TUCK-PONDER: Not all the time. I think some of the time. I think you take it as far is it can go and then I think that you have to have someone who's working of that structure. If you look at when things started to move…I sort of study political movements and social change and if you look at Martin Luther King, Martin Luther King was a tremendous American a tremendous human being, but the only reason they listened to

Martin Luther King was because they didn't want to listen to Malcolm X. And it's the same thing with Al Sharpton, you don't want to listen to Al Sharpton, you don't want to deal with him, you don't want to talk to him, then all of a sudden Jessie Jackson starts to look really reasonable to you. That's how it works, sometimes you have to push people to listen to you.

WARREN: Do you think that any minority in a position of power should use their position to help their group?

TUCK-PONDER: If they're [the group] worthy. You know because, I think that you can say --- and I think that I've been in this position as well, I mean you really want to help people or people will come to you because of your position and say, you know, help us out but they're just not correct. They're not prepared, they're not knowledgeable, they're not thoughtful and they're not coming to the issue totally prepared to address it in an effective way and if they're not prepared you're not doing anything if you help them to perpetuate that.

CLOSING

WARREN: Do you believe that your legal training made a difference in the way you approached your career?

TUCK-PONDER: Yes, I do. I think my legal training has done a lot in terms of helping me to think on my feet. To not be afraid to fail, to not be afraid to fall down and to absolutely insist upon being taken seriously. And I learned those skills at Penn and I can't say that I would have learned those skills at anywhere else. Another kinder, gentler law school I probably (laughter) wouldn't have learned it. You leave here, you – you've gained something. If you can get through here, you have really gained something and that's not just as an African-American, I think that's just across the board.

WARREN: If a new lawyer wants to go into politics, what should she do?

TUCK-PONDER: She should, the only advice I would give is that you really do need to have an income. I always thought that this was sort of a mission and money is not important. Money is important and you have to be able to support yourself and sustain yourself and so what I would say to someone who is starting, I'd say, don't – make it a – don't make it your vocation, make it your avocation, you know, get a job, gain some experience and do your politics on the side. And if you really think it's something that you want to do, then transition yourself into in a reasonable way. But take care of your obligations, take care of your student loans, because they don't go away. And take care of your other bills and obligations and recognize that you need to do things for yourself.

WARREN: Do you think differently about being a lawyer after fifteen years of varied legal and political experience?

TUCK-PONDER: Yes, I think that when I came to law school I honestly thought that there was only one road that I could travel on and that was to a firm and that I would go there and work very long hours and then maybe, one day, somebody would let me be a partner. Now, I look at my legal training as the key to open a lot of doors and the way by which I can travel a bunch of different roads because I have a lot of different skills that are useful in a number of different forms and a number of different ways. And that's what law school does for you, it makes you think about-- it helps you to be a problem solver and it helps you to figure out things and it really is a valuable education and, you know what, it took me a long time to realize that. If you would have asked me that five years out of Penn, I would have said absolutely not, it was a waste of my time, why did I do that. Now, older and wiser, it's the best thing I could have done, it's the best place I could've gone, if I had it to do all over again I'd do it again.

WARREN: What do you aspire in the near future?

TUCK-PONDER: To be a good mother and a good wife and a good citizen and to continue to keep my foot on the back of people who are supposed to be serving the public.

WARREN: At the end or your career, what would you like to look back and say you helped to accomplish?

TUCK-PONDER: At the end of my career, I would like to look back and have people say that she really tried to improve the quality of life for all people. That you could depend on her for help that she'd do whatever it is that she could do and she was a pretty decent person.

WARREN: What do you consider to be your most significant contribution to New Jersey or society?

TUCK-PONDER: I think hanging in there. Hanging in there and being part of the dialogue and trying to encourage people to do the right thing and trying to encourage people to participate and to be apart of what's going?

WARREN: What do you like to do in your free time?

TUCK-PONDER: I don't have any free time (laughter). But if I did…I would reupholster my husband's chair but that's what I would do. But I don't have free time.

WARREN: Do you have any children?

TUCK-PONDER: I have one. She's fifteen months old.

WARREN: Well, thank you very much for your time. I really enjoyed interviewing you.

TUCK-PONDER: Thank you, thank you. It was fun.